

Exegesis, Theology, and Exile: The Commentary on Psalms of Moses Israel de Mercado

By: YITZHAK BERGER

A century after the expulsion from Spain, many Jews of the Sephardic diaspora found a home in the Dutch Republic, which permitted the open expression of diverse faiths.¹ In the newly vibrant Jewish society of Amsterdam, several rabbis attained positions of distinction, including the community's decades-long religious leader R. Saul Levi Morteira (d. 1660) and the renowned anti-Sabbatean R. Jacob Sasportas (d. 1698).²

Among the standout pupils of Morteira was the young Moses Israel de Mercado, who died in 1652 at age twenty-one.³ Despite his youth,

¹ The actual motives for Jewish immigration were both religious and economic. For discussion, see Daniel M. Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000), 96–101.

² On Morteira's life and intellectual contribution, see Marc Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Morteira's Sermons to a Congregation of "New Jews"* (Monographs of the Hebrew Union College 32; Cincinnati: HUC, 2005). On Sasportas, see Yaacob Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi: The Life of Jacob Sasportas* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019).

³ See the title page of Sasportas' eulogy for Mercado, **אלה דברי החכם [...] יעקב ששפורטס נר"ו** (Amsterdam: Benveniste, 1652), viewable online at: https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990010622200205171/NLI. Regarding the eulogies for Mercado by Morteira and Sasportas, see Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam*, 161–64, 536–43; Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi*, 56–61, 68–70. Mercado, when citing Morteira, identifies him as his teacher. He also generally refers to him by the clever phrase **החכם השל"ם**: while this phrase bears the straightforward meaning “the perfected sage,” the word **השל"ם**, as an acronym,

Yitzhak Berger is Professor of Biblical Studies at Hunter College of the City University of New York. He is the author of numerous studies, including *Jonah in the Shadows of Eden* (Indiana University Press, 2016), *Radak on Genesis: Creation, Humanity, Torah: With an Annotated Translation of His Allegorical Commentary on Genesis 2–4* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2024), and *Allusion and Meaning in Judges and Ruth* (T & T Clark, forthcoming).

Mercado composed rich, elaborate commentaries on the books of Psalms and Ecclesiastes. In the year following the author's death, these commentaries appeared in print under the editorship of Sasportas.⁴ Significantly, these works stand out in their cultural context: although this diaspora community placed substantial emphasis on study of the Bible, its exegetical compositions generally took other forms. Specifically, most such works were composed in the vernacular, seeking to educate the public or, in the case of more advanced works, addressing select biblical passages in the service of a particular topical or ideological objective.⁵ Mercado's commentaries, by contrast, feature highly sophisticated, verse-by-verse, Hebrew-language expositions of the biblical text.

In the present study, I call attention to some noteworthy features of Mercado's commentary on Psalms. In the first part of the study, I describe how the work—like certain other material produced by the Jewish community of Amsterdam—bespeaks the impact of exile on the psyche of Sephardic Jews, despite the freedoms they enjoyed under Dutch rule.⁶ In the second part, I offer examples of Mercado's creative philosophical

stands for הרב שאול לוי מורטירה ("Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira"). Regarding this acronym, cf. Alexander Altmann, "Eternality of Punishment: A Theological Controversy within the Amsterdam Rabbinate in the Thirties of the Seventeenth Century," *PAAJR* 40 (1972): 1–88 (5).

⁴ *Commentary on the Books of Ecclesiastes and Psalms* (Hebrew; Amsterdam: Benveniste, 1652/3). A facsimile edition (Brooklyn: Goldenberg, 1992/3) is available online:

<https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=6348&st=&pgnum=1>. Morteira reports that Mercado did not complete the commentary on Ecclesiastes, and so scholars propose that it was Sasportas who, as editor of the publication, brought it to completion. See Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam*, 542 n. 30 (cf. Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi*, 61), and my forthcoming companion study, "Philosophy and Exegesis in the Sephardic Diaspora: The Commentary on Ecclesiastes of Moses Israel de Mercado," in *Keter David – David's Diadem: An Examined Torah Life: Essays in Honor of Prof. David Shatz* (ed. Daniel Rynhold et al.; Boston: Academic Studies Press). The commentary on Psalms, with slight modifications, was republished—more readably, albeit without authorial attribution—in an edition of the book of Psalms (Amsterdam: Proops, 1739/40), available online at:

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=UpON323VLu0C&pg=GBS.PP8&hl=en>.

⁵ See Benjamin E. Fisher, *Amsterdam's People of the Book: Jewish Society and the Turn to Scripture in the Seventeenth Century* (Cincinnati: HUC, 2020), 7–8. I am indebted to Fisher for his help on this matter.

⁶ See especially chapter 9 of Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam*, regarding the theme of exile in the sermons of Morteira, Mercado's mentor.

exegesis, which draws substantially on the medieval rationalist tradition. Ultimately, by examining this distinctive work of biblical interpretation, I seek both to bring attention to Mercado's commentaries and to enhance further our appreciation of the intellectual output of this much-studied Jewish community.

Prophesying Exile: The Book of Psalms and the Jewish Diaspora

Defending the Conversos

In several instances in his commentary on Psalms, Mercado makes explicit reference to the Inquisition. We begin with Psalm 44, where the poet expresses a bitter complaint that, despite Israel's devotion to God, He has surrendered His people to their enemies. In describing that devotion, the speaker declares *לא נסוג אחור לבנו ותט אשרנו מני ארחיך*—generally rendered, “Our hearts have not turned back, nor have our steps turned from Your path” (44:19). Notably, however, the verse's second clause features no overt negation. In the translation above, therefore, the word “nor” draws on—and extends—the negation (*לא*) that stands at the beginning of the first clause.

Mercado, for his part, endorses this standard approach. Nevertheless, without retreating from this endorsement, he proceeds to offer a perspective that, in a subtle way, accounts for the positive formulation in the second clause. The relevant part of his comment reads as follows:

By divine inspiration, this verse alludes to the Spanish Inquisition, wherein [the authorities] force the Jews “to turn their steps from the path” (*לנסות אשורם מני דרך*) and to act as [Christians] do. The meaning [of the verse, then], is that “our hearts have not turned back” (*לא נסוג אחור לבנו*) to do this volitionally, even though “our steps have turned” outwardly “from Your path.” After all, we did this because of fear of punishment: it is as though we were coerced. In our hearts and minds, however, we “have *not* turned back.”⁷

Ingeniously, by connecting the psalm's formulation to the Inquisition, Mercado implies an explanation for the absence of a negation in the latter half of the verse. On the surface, he explains, the text affirms that the Jews *have* in fact “turned [their] steps from [God's] path,” outwardly living as Christians. Emphatically, however, they did not take this step of their own volition. Rather, it is their oppressors who forced their

⁷ The passage appears on p. 43b of the *Commentary*.

hand. The psalmist, therefore, while acknowledging—on one level of meaning—the Jews’ deviation from traditional practice (“our steps have turned from Your path”), simultaneously affirms that, because their “hearts have not turned back” from God, that inner devotion must inform any fair evaluation of their conduct. Thus, even if outwardly the Jews have veered from the ways of God, in a more fundamental sense they have not (“*nor* have our steps turned from Your path”).

Seeking further absolution for his oppressed kin, Mercado sees in the psalm another possible reference to the plight of Sephardic Jews. The next verse reads, “You have broken us in a place of *tannim*, and you have covered us with deep darkness” (כִּי דִכִּיתֵנוּ בַּמָּקוֹם תַּנִּים וַתִּכְסֵנוּ עֲלֵינוּ) (בצלמות; Ps 44:20). Interpreters generally affirm that the word *tannim* denotes a type of wild animal.⁸ Mercado, however, regards *tannim* (תַּנִּים) here as an alternative form of *tannin* (תַּנִּין)—as, for example, in Ezekiel 32:2 (הַתַּנִּים בַּיָּמִים)—proposing that the text refers to serpent-like creatures that play a role in a tragic episode relating to the expulsion from Spain:⁹

It is possible that the poet, by divine inspiration, alludes here to the great expulsion of our people from Spain. Among the evil things done to them, all the small children, babies, and infants were sent off to a distant island. It is a place of snakes, adders, and wild animals: that is why it is called The Isle of Lizards (איזלא די) (לאגר"טס)—a place filled with *tannim*. [The children] were left there until they were broken (דוכאו) and died. Thus it says, “You have broken us (דכיתנו) in a place of *tannim*, and You have covered us with deep darkness” [...]: with our children gone, we were left with no strength or fortitude, and so we proceeded along as though in darkness, banished, fleeing like a lost sheep that wanders about, eliciting compassion from no one. Afterwards, therefore, in the face of the enemy, we were too fainthearted to walk in Your path openly.¹⁰

In this passage, Mercado refers to a group of Spanish Jews who, shortly after the expulsion, found brief refuge in Portugal. The Portuguese king, however, dispatched a large number of Jewish children to a newly colonized, sparsely inhabited, lizard-infested island known today

⁸ The standard translation is “jackals”; see, e.g., the rendering in NRSV.

⁹ Ibn Ezra, whose commentaries Mercado often cites, likewise interprets *tannim* here in the sense of *tannin*. See also NJPS, which adopts the same interpretation.

¹⁰ *Commentary*, 43b.

as São Tomé, most of them dying in short order.¹¹ When the psalmist, therefore, states “You have broken us in a place of *tannim*,” Mercado sees a possible allusion to this episode—a debilitating atrocity that, in his opinion, helps absolve Sephardic Jews of culpability for concealing their Judaism.

The Motives of the Inquisition

If Psalm 44, according to Mercado, emphasizes the inculpability of Sephardic conversos, other psalms, in his view, highlight the corruption of their oppressors. Psalm 58, as understood by earlier exegetes, pertains to an episode in the life of King David.¹² As he often does, however, Mercado, focused as he is on the Jewish exile, instead relates the psalm to Israel’s diaspora experience.

In the opening verses of the poem, the speaker accuses the wicked of speaking, acting, and judging corruptly. In Mercado’s view, this refers to oppressors of the Jews who, seeking to usurp their assets, level duplicitous allegations against them:

“You act with a heart full of deception” (אַף בלב עולות תפעלון; Ps 58:3), to the point that everyone thinks that you judge righteously and uprightly. This refers to when [the nations] accuse [Israel ...] of disdaining [the majority religion] and [present themselves] as standing up for the honor of [that religion]. Their entire motive, however, is to confiscate [Israel’s] assets [...], as in the case of the Inquisition where their main motive is to pursue the assets [of the Jews ...].¹³

This alleged financial motive, furthermore—regarded by historians as an actual reason for the persecution of Sephardic Jews—renders these oppressors impervious to reason:¹⁴

¹¹ The most commonly cited source for this episode is the account by the sixteenth-century Portuguese Jewish writer Samuel Usque in his *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* (trans. Martin A. Cohen; Judaica Texts and Translations [Second Series] 1; Philadelphia: JPS, 1964), 201–202. For references by traditional writers closer to the time of the event, see Abarbanel at Exod 7:26, and the commentary *Tzeror Ha-Mor* by R. Abraham Saba at Deut 28:34.

¹² See, e.g., Rashi and Radak at Ps 58:2.

¹³ *Commentary*, 51b.

¹⁴ For a basic discussion of such financial motives, see Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 40–41, 148–151.

“[The wicked] are like a deaf adder that plugs its ear” (כמו פתן חרש) (איטם אזנו; 58:5) – [The psalmist] compares them to an adder that does its evil with its mouth: they likewise do their evil with their decrees. [The phrase] “plugs its ear” means that they do not listen to our responses and arguments. Thus he continues, “so that it does not hear the voice of charmers” (אשר לא ישמע לקול מלחשים; 58:6). For even if we [challenge] them, asking why they fail to extend righteous judgment to innocent people who did nothing wrong to them, “they conspire together cleverly” (חובר חברים מחכם; 58:6). [... That is], they devise clever schemes, saying that [the Jews] face execution because they deny [their oppressors’] god, when this is [actually] a scheme to confiscate their assets.¹⁵

Finally, commenting on the phrase “The wicked go astray from the womb” (זורו רשעים מרחם; 58:4), Mercado sees the psalm emphasizing the outlandishness of coercing religious choices:

Ibn Ezra explains [that זורו] derives from [the root denoting] זרות (“foreignness”).¹⁶ The intention, in my view, is that these wicked people are innately “foreign” to others, in that they seek to coerce and control Israel’s choices, so that, by force and against their will, [the Jews] will follow [their oppressors’] teachings and believe in their religion. This is a “foreign” notion, because even God does not coerce [a person’s] choices.¹⁷

For Mercado, then, the religious coercion that characterized the Inquisition not only lacked integrity but also violated the basic, unassailable human instinct that religious choices must be free. It emerges, accordingly, that our commentator, a product of the nascent Age of Enlightenment and of a society that had only recently embraced religious toleration, saw such toleration—remarkably—both as a philosophical necessity and as the default, natural state of human affairs. Thus, he contends, the psalmist highlights the “foreignness” of the religious coercion practiced by Israel’s oppressors.

Inquisitorial Tactics: Suspicion by Association

We have noted that Mercado, when addressing psalms that others see as referring to the troubles of David, often perceives a reference to the national exile of the Jews. Psalm 31 presents another example of this ten-

¹⁵ *Commentary*, 51b.

¹⁶ See the commentary of Ibn Ezra ad loc.

¹⁷ *Commentary*, 51b.

dency: despite its first-person singular narration, Mercado regards this poem as an expression of Israel's wider diaspora experience.

We turn our attention to verse 12: מכל צוררי הייתי חרפה ולשכני מאד ופחד למידעי ראי בחוץ נדדו ממני. While the first half of this formulation presents some difficulty, most straightforwardly we might render the verse as follows: "Because of my adversaries I became [a source of] shame—especially for my neighbors—and [a source of] fear for my acquaintances. Those who notice me in the street move away from me." Mercado, for his part, commenting on the first clause, offers a novel explanation why the speaker has become a source of shame: "because it is shameful for them to be labeled a Jew."

In this formulation by Mercado, the antecedent of the word "them" remains unclear: do the "adversaries," in the wake of what they have unleashed, end up worrying that, at some point, they might themselves be shamed by suspicion of engaging in Jewish practices? Or is Mercado referring to unspecified members of the wider population, who bear the same concern? Either way, he interprets the clause in a novel way: the shame in question involves not merely association with Israel but being labeled a Jew. Mercado's interpretation of the rest of the verse follows suit:

"For my neighbors," who give the appearance of being [my] friends, [I am] "especially" [a source of shame]. "And [I am a source of] fear for my acquaintances" – They all fear that, because they are my acquaintances, they will be detained, akin to [what is done] in the Inquisition today when [the authorities] interrogate the acquaintances of those in their custody. Hence, "those who notice me in the street move away from me," lest people say that they took notice of me because they are Jews like me—"for it is not for naught that the starling flocks with the crow, but because it is of the same kind" (b. *Hullin* 65a).¹⁸

In this psalm, then, Mercado sees not only an expression of the bitterness of exile but also, more specifically, a reference to the tactics of inquisitors who cast suspicion on anyone caught associating with Jews: because of these tactics, the psalmist affirms, people avoid Jews out of fear and shame of being identified with them.

¹⁸ *Commentary*, 34b.

The Fate of Spain and the Church

As we might expect, in Mercado's exegesis, the theme of exile also extends to salvation: when the text, in his view, describes the exile of Israel, any references to deliverance suggest a step in the process leading to the final redemption.

Moreover, Mercado often perceives a depiction of the Four Kingdoms—understood to be Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome—that, according to the book of Daniel (2:36–45), successively achieve domination only to give way to an eternal kingdom of God. Indeed, in Mercado's exegetical milieu, others too perceived sustained biblical allusions to the Four Kingdoms. Most notably, in his *Piedra Gloriosa*, R. Menasseh ben Israel endeavors to find references to these kingdoms throughout the Bible.¹⁹ In multiple instances, furthermore, when Mercado perceives such references in the Psalms, he draws on interpretations provided by his teacher Morteira.²⁰ According to all these figures, the ultimate redemption, which involves the destruction of Rome, marks the end of the Christian domination responsible for the persecution of Sephardic Jewry.

Psalms 53, in Mercado's opinion, stands among the texts that allude to the Four Kingdoms. For our purposes, we turn our attention to verse 6, after the psalm makes its alleged reference to Rome. Addressing Israel, the poet alludes to "a great fear" (שם פחדו פחד), affirming that "God scattered the bones of your oppressors" (פזר עצמות חונך). According to Mercado, it is Israel's enemies who experience this "great fear," as they recognize their waning dominance. Specifically, he explains, the psalm refers to the Spanish Empire, which during Mercado's short life experienced serious challenges to its authority:

The nations that, during the Inquisition, consumed our assets and killed many of our people "experienced great fear." After all, Portugal and Catalonia rebelled against Spain, [the nation] that expelled us, and from that point forward the Hispanic Monarchy has been diminished. For prior to that, it ruled almost the entire globe. [...] The phrase "God] scattered the bones of your oppressors" [...]

¹⁹ For a basic description of this Spanish-language work, see Steven Nadler, *Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi of Amsterdam* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 187–93. The work is available online at: <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=2PpiAAAAcAAJ&pg=GBS.PP4&hl=en>.

²⁰ See at Pss 93 and 118 (*Commentary*, 79a, 96a).

means that He scattered the rulership [of Spain, distributing it] among others, such as the kingdoms of Portugal and Catalonia [...].²¹

Mercado refers here to two rebellions against Spanish rule—one by Portugal and the other by Catalonia—that commenced in 1640, initiating conflicts that endured well past the commentator’s untimely death.²² Although Mercado exaggerates the unraveling of the Spanish empire, this bold interpretation underscores his inclination to connect the Psalms to the events of his time: if the text, as he sees it, envisions the decline of Christendom, the political troubles of Spain suggest the fulfillment of the psalmist’s prophecy.

In another instance, moreover, Mercado sees a possible reference to the Church itself. Psalm 110, in his view, describes the Messiah and the salvation that will accompany his arrival. In describing the defeat of Israel’s enemies, the psalmist employs the phrase *מִחֵץ רֹאשׁ עַל אֶרֶץ רַבָּה*, which Mercado understands literally to mean, “[God] will shatter a head along with a great country” (110:6).²³ Here is the relevant part of his comment:

It is possible to explain that this refers to Rome, the seat of the Edomite kingdom. “He will shatter a head” would thus mean that, along with Rome, He will shatter its head—that is, the Pope (הַכּוֹמֵר (הַגָּדוֹל), who sits above them as their head.²⁴

Indeed, for Mercado, this interpretation bears a certain irony. This psalm, which begins “The Lord said to my master” (נֹאם ה' לַאֲדֹנָי), stands as a central Christological text, whereby one alleged part of God (the “father”) is said to speak to another (the “son”).²⁵ Mercado, for his part, at the beginning of the psalm, dismisses this interpretation with notable sharpness:

There are different views on the meaning of this psalm. Some explain [נֹאם ה' לַאֲדֹנָי to mean] “The Lord said to *the Lord*,” rejoicing

²¹ *Commentary*, 49b.

²² For a concise presentation of the history, see J. H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain: 1469–1716* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 341–49.

²³ Mercado briefly acknowledges an alternative possibility, whereby the blood of the shattered head spills “on” (עַל) the great country.

²⁴ *Commentary*, 92b.

²⁵ For a substantial list of Jewish and Christian sources pertaining to this text, see David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizḥon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Judaica Texts and Translations 4; Philadelphia: JPS, 1979), 307 n. 19.

over [this interpretation] “like one who finds a great treasure” (Ps 119:162). But they distort this, as [they do] the formulation מפשע עמי נגע למו (“because of the sins of my people, a plague was visited upon them”; Isa 53:8).

Indeed, not a single verse in the psalm can be explained according to their approach. What could be the meaning of [the phrase], “Sit at My right hand until I make your enemies your footstool” (שב לימיני עד אשית איביך הדם רגליך; Ps 110:1)? After all, this [formulation] suggests that [the addressee] has no power to destroy [his enemies] without the help of [the speaker]! Furthermore, [how can they explain the phrase], “The Lord sends out from Zion the rod of your strength” (מטה עוז ישלח ה' מציון; 110:2), when from the residents of Zion He [actually] sent out a rod of *affliction* on [Jesus] so that he was impaled? Also, [how can they explain the phrase], “Your nation offers itself willingly” (עמך נדבות; 10:3), when not a single nation came to his aid? And [as for the verse], “The Lord has sworn: [... you are a priest forever]” (נשבע ה' ... אתה כהן לעולם; 110:4), how can [one party take] an oath [to the other] if they are one and the same? The word “priest” (כהן), for that matter, can only refer to a human leader. All told, it does not pay to invest energy into this matter: what I have written should be more than sufficient.²⁶

At the beginning of this passage, Mercado reacts sharply to the claim, advocated by Christian interpreters, that “the Lord” and “my master” refer not to God and a human being but to parts of the one divine essence. In presenting his objection, he draws an analogy to the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, where Christians were compelled to render the word למו in the singular so that it might refer to Jesus (“on him”) instead of to the people of Israel (“on them”):²⁷ in both cases, Mercado implies, the Christian reading, seeing an exclusive reference to the divine, denies the genuine plurality—and attendant human referent—signaled by the text. As for the remainder of the psalm, he argues that “not a single verse” accords with the Christological interpretation.

Against this background, then, we might imagine Mercado taking particular satisfaction, as he approached the end of the psalm, in interpreting מהץ ראש על ארץ רבה as a reference to the ultimate destruction of

²⁶ *Commentary*, 92a.

²⁷ On this problem with the Christian reading, see earlier Radak at Isa 53:12 (in uncensored editions).

Rome—the seat of Christendom—which bore responsibility for so much persecution of his Jewish brethren.

The Destiny of Jerusalem

To conclude this section, we turn our attention to Mercado's conception of the psalmist's vision of the fate of Jerusalem. Here, too, our commentator perceives that historical events confirm that vision.

Psalm 125, speaking of the righteous who trust in God, compares them to the city of Jerusalem: "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever (הַבְּטָחִים בַּה' כְּהָר) (צִיּוֹן לֹא יִמָּט לְעוֹלָם יֵשֵׁב). As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, now and forever (יְרוּשָׁלַם הָרִים סָבִיב לֵה וְה') (סָבִיב לַעֲמֹ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם)" (125:1–2). On the surface, these verses suggest that no enemy can conquer and destroy Jerusalem—a claim that does not accord with reality. Instead, therefore, drawing on his perception of history, Mercado explains the psalm to mean that, apart from Israel, no nation can rule the city in true peace and prosperity:

This emerges clearly from historical accounts: many kings waged war on Jerusalem with great armies, to make it the seat of their power and rule. God, however, did not enable their "rod" and kingship to "rest" there (לֹא יָנוּה שְׂבֵט הָרִשָּׁע) (125:3). Instead, they were all defeated [...]. Today it is in the hands of Ishmaelites, a lowly nation, and they do not rest there peacefully. Indeed, it is entirely desolate, in ruins, and does not bear fruit as it did previously [...]. It will not be restored to its earlier state until its true owners return.²⁸

Once again Mercado exaggerates, especially in his characterization of Jerusalem under contemporary Ottoman rule. At the same time, we may surmise that our commentator, having read accounts of medieval crusades, concluded—with justification—that those recurring efforts to seize Jerusalem achieved at best only short-lived success. This conclusion, in turn, facilitated Mercado's approach to the remarks of the psalmist, which he regards, as in other cases, to foresee the realities of later history: Jerusalem, he contends, the locus of so much conflict, will regain sustained peace and prosperity only with the return of Israel in a time of redemption.

²⁸ *Commentary*, 104a.

Theology and Interpretation

Providence and Divine Justice

Like any traditionalist commentator, Mercado assigns a divine role to Israel's exile and prospective redemption. Indeed, in his view, the sufferings of Israel, on the one hand, and the dominance enjoyed by its oppressors, on the other, each serve a specific purpose. He presents the matter succinctly at Psalm 94, addressing the formulation, "Fortunate is the man whom You afflict, O Lord, [...] to relieve him from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked" (אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו יה [...] להשקיט לו מימי רע עד יכרה לרשע שחת; 94:12–13):

This verse assigns two purposes to the present exile. One is to purify [the people of] Israel, so that they will merit the world to come. In this way they are "fortunate." That is the meaning of [the phrase], "to relieve him from days of trouble": [God] afflicts [the people of Israel] in this world [...] to save them from ultimate retribution in the world to come. [...] Meanwhile, [God] keeps them in exile "until a pit is dug for the wicked." This means: until the sins [of their oppressors] reach a tipping point, whereby the Pit is dug for them "so that they are destroyed forever" (92:8).²⁹

When Mercado speaks here of the "world to come," he is referring to the physical world in a time of redemption.³⁰ The exile, he contends, by "purifying" Israel and enabling its oppressors to accumulate evil deeds, serves the dual purpose of facilitating, in that redemptive era, ultimate reward for Israel and retribution for its enemies.

²⁹ *Commentary*, 80a.

³⁰ On the surface, Mercado here seems to adopt a non-Maimonidean eschatology, whereby ultimate reward—expressed by the term **עולם הבא** ("the world to come")—obtains in the physical world at a stage of the redemption when the righteous are resurrected. See also at Pss 49:15 and 52:7–8 (*Commentary*, 46b, 48b–49a) where Mercado refers to "the world of the souls" (**עולם הנשמות**) and "the world of the resurrection" (**עולם התחייה**), terminology that is more commonly associated with the non-Maimonidean view. (For Maimonides' position, whereby **עולם הבא**, denoting ultimate reward for the individual, obtains in a non-physical state, see *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance*, ch. 8.) In Mercado's own intellectual climate, however, note the discussion by R. Menasseh ben Israel in his *Nishmat Hayyim* (latter paragraphs of 1:17), which acknowledges the fluidity of the phrase **עולם הבא** and deploys the expressions **עולם הנשמות** and **עולם התחייה** even when describing Maimonides' position. See online at: https://www.sefaria.org/Nishmat_Chayyim%2C_First_Treatise.17.3?lang=bi.

At the same time, for Mercado no less than for others, the doctrine of divine justice stood in tension with the constellational order that was thought to govern the world. He addresses this tension directly in his remarks on Psalm 1, which affirms reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked:

Even though the sages say that [...] “children, life, and sustenance depend not on merit but on the constellations” (b. *Mo’ed Katan* 28a), it is necessary to insert the word “exclusively” [after the word “merit” ...]. The meaning is as follows. If a person’s constellation ordains that he should experience many serious troubles, then even if the person is righteous, that will not suffice to make him successful in direct opposition to his constellation. Rather, his righteousness will save him from many troubles, and his reward is reserved for the world to come. If, however, the constellation of a righteous person nudges him slightly in the direction of success, then his righteousness, in conjunction with the influence of the constellation, will yield actual success. The converse is true for the wicked.³¹

In this passage, Mercado addresses the question of divine justice on the level of the individual. In his view, the constellations point toward certain outcomes, and in the unredeemed material world, the merits of the individual exert only limited influence on those outcomes. Indeed, in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Mercado highlights the constraints dictated by the constellational order: those constraints, he explains, contribute to Kohelet’s sense of the futility of human endeavor.³² The book of Psalms, by contrast, which often invokes divine justice, draws our commentator in the opposite direction: in the present commentary, when Mercado describes the experiences of righteous individuals—and certainly those of Israel collectively—he consistently underscores the divine hand in those experiences.

Mercado’s strongest formulations on this matter pertain to Israel as a nation: drawing on a rabbinic formulation (“There is no constellation for Israel” [אין מזל לישראל]; b. *Shabbat* 156a), he contends that the constellations do not affect the Israelite collective. Thus, commenting on Psalm 121—which he regards as a description of God’s guardianship of Israel during the exile—Mercado writes as follows:

“The Lord is your guardian” (ה' שמרך; 121:5) in every way: He does not place you under the rule of the stars and constellations, for He

³¹ *Commentary*, 14b.

³² See my discussion in “Philosophy and Exegesis.”

is “your shade” (צלך; *ibid.*) to save you from all the evils that come upon you. [The phrase] “upon your right hand” (על יד ימינך; *ibid.*) means that He guides you like a person who guides his son by his right hand so that [the son] does not falter. [...] Thus [the psalm continues], “the sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night” (יוםם השמש לא יככה וירח בלילה; 121:6), meaning that their rule shall not affect you. [...] Indeed, all the good and bad that befalls you comes from [God]: it is not because of the constellational order.³³

In this passage, Mercado calls attention to the psalm’s declaration, in the midst of its affirmations of God’s guardianship, that neither the sun nor the moon shall cause injury. The point of this declaration, he cleverly explains, is precisely to exclude Israel from the influence of the heavenly bodies and to place it instead under God’s direct providence.

Psalm 147, according to Mercado, affirms the same principle. In describing God, the psalm states, “He counts the stars by number, calling them all by name (מונה מספר לכוכבים לכלם שמות יקרא). Our Lord is great, abundant in power (גדול אדונינו ורב כח) [...]” (147:4–5). The assertion that God counts the stars and names them, Mercado explains, means that the constellations operate only because of the divine will. The ensuing declaration that “our Lord is great,” uttered by the people of Israel, then goes one step further:

We, however, are not under the rule of [the constellations]. Even if they declare on us misfortune and perpetual subservience, God stands above them, and He will fulfill his promise and gather us to his land. That is why [the text] proceeds to say, “Our Lord is great.” For He is our Lord, and He did not leave us under the rule of the constellations as He did the other nations [...].³⁴

Once again, then, the psalmist, despite affirming the force of the constellations, underscores that they bear no influence on Israel, which remains directly under God’s control.

Initially, Mercado thus seems to draw a neat distinction between the individual, who—as suggested by his comment on Psalm 1—escapes the constellations only partially, and the nation of Israel, which escapes them entirely. In fact, however, in other contexts, our commentator offers a more expansive conception of God’s providence over righteous individuals, exceeding what his remarks on Psalm 1 might seem to allow.

³³ *Commentary*, 103a.

³⁴ *Commentary*, 115b.

We begin with Psalm 33, which, according to Mercado, articulates various fundamental theological principles. For example, regarding God's relationship to the creation, the psalm declares, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made (בדבר ה' שמים נעשו) [...]. He gathers the waters of the sea like a pillar (כנס כנוד מי הים) [...]. All the earth fears the Lord (יראו מה' כל הארץ) [...], for He spoke and it came to be (ויהי) [...]" (33:6–9). For Mercado, the text here alludes to a scientific conundrum: according to the prevailing conception, the waters, because they are lighter than earth, should have covered the entire land. The presence of dry land, therefore, demonstrates that God "gathers the waters of the sea like a pillar," preventing them from flooding the earth. This ever-present violation of the laws of nature, in turn, attests to God not merely as creator of the world ("He spoke and it came to be") but also as the force that enables its sustained viability ("He gathers the waters of the sea like a pillar").³⁵

More important for our discussion, Mercado, drawing on a classification that he attributes to "recent sages" (החכמים האחרונים), perceives references in this psalm to three distinct types of divine providence.³⁶ First the text declares, "The Lord gazes from the heavens; He sees all humankind" (משמים הביט ה' ראה את כל בני האדם; Ps 33:13). This formulation, Mercado explains, affirms providence on the level of the species (ההשגחה המיניית), specifying humankind in particular. The next verse then states, "From where He sits enthroned, He watches over all the inhabitants of the earth" (ממכון שבתו השגיח אל כל יושבי הארץ; 33:14). This statement, in Mercado's view, affirms God's providence over the creation generally (ההשגחה הכללית). Then afterwards the psalm declares, "A king is not saved by his great army; [...] the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his kindness" (אין המלך נושע ברב חיל) [...]; 33:16–19). These assertions, according to our commentator, affirm that God exercises providence even over individuals (ההשגחה האישית).

³⁵ Mercado's remarks show the influence of Radak; see my discussion of Radak's view in *Radak on Genesis: Creation, Humanity, and Torah: With an Annotated Translation of His Allegorical Commentary on Genesis 2–4* (Sources and Studies 23; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2024), 31–38.

³⁶ For an earlier, sixteenth-century example of this three-part classification, see the Responsa of Radbaz on *Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 1:5; online: https://rambam.alhatorah.org/Dual/Responsa_of_Radbaz_on_Mishneh_Torah/Yesodei_HaTorah/1.5#m7e0n6. I am indebted to Baruch Berger for this reference.

For our purposes, consider especially the following remarks by Mercado regarding this last formulation:

“The eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His kindness” – [...] It is known that the eyes of the Lord “roam throughout the earth” (עיניו משטטות בכל הארץ; 2 Chr 16:9). To those who fear the Lord, however, He extends more individualized providence than [what He extends to] everyone else (השגחה פרטית מכלם). [...] Possibly, this explains [the singular formulation], “the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him” [...]: when a person wants to look at a specific object and examine it very carefully, [...] he closes one eye so that he can see better with the other one. That is, he channels his visual capacity into [the open eye], so that he sees the object more clearly. Figuratively, the same is true regarding the individualized providence that God extends to those who fear Him. In a similar vein, when [the next psalm] says, “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous” (עיני ה' אל צדיקים; 34:16), it means that God figuratively opens His eyes wide to ensure that [the righteous] do not fall prey to any of the evils that befall the world. Thus, it says subsequently, “They call out and the Lord hears; He saves them from all their troubles” (צעקו וה' שמע מכל צרותם הצילים; 34:18).³⁷

In this passage, Mercado does not merely affirm—in a variation of the Maimonidean view—that God exercises greater providence over righteous individuals.³⁸ Beyond that, drawing on the phrase “He saves them from all their troubles” (מכל צרותם הצילים), he states that the righteous “do not fall prey to *any* of the evils that befall the world.” This formulation, even if not intended in its absolute, literal sense, suggests that the righteous merit a more intense form of providence than Mercado’s remarks on Psalm 1 might have implied. In those remarks, after all, affirming the influence of the constellations, he asserted merely that the righteousness of an individual “will save him from *many* troubles” (מצרות רבות), whereas “his reward is reserved for the world to come.” Here, by contrast, his formulation suggests that *no* troubles befall the righteous.

Indeed, in another context, Mercado acknowledges outright the possibility—in principle, at least—of an individual meriting protection from

³⁷ *Commentary*, 36b.

³⁸ See *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:18. Consistent with the central importance that Maimonides assigns to nurturing the intellect, his presentation emphasizes intellectual attainment, not righteous action. I address Mercado’s departure from this position near the end of the essay.

all misfortune. Psalm 37 contains the striking assertion, “I have been young and am now old, and I have not seen a righteous person abandoned, his children seeking bread” (נער הייתי גם זקנתי ולא ראיתי צדיק נעזב) (37:25). Taken straightforwardly, of course, this assertion does not conform to reality: many righteous people, after all, experience intense poverty. Mercado, therefore, explains the intention as follows:

When people say that “there is no suffering without sin” (אין יסורין) (בלי עון; b. *Shabbat* 55a), they are undoubtedly correct. If we find that numerous righteous people nonetheless suffer afflictions, some kind of sin must have preceded [those afflictions]. After all, “there is no righteous person in the world who does what is good and does not sin [at all]” (אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא) (Eccl 7:20). The psalmist, therefore, [means to] say that he has not seen a *perfectly* righteous person (צדיק גמור) abandoned. For if God brings a measure of poverty on the righteous, so that they are left “hungry and lacking everything” (ברעב ובחסר כל; cf. Deut 28:48), this serves to cleanse them from any trace of sin. [Troubles of this kind] are called “afflictions of love” (יסורים של אהבה; b. *Berakhot* 5a). [Such individuals], accordingly, are not perfectly righteous, because they bear some sin that requires cleansing. The principle, then, is that God “watches over those who are devoted to Him” (חסידיו ישמר; 1 Sam 2:9), His providence not abandoning them.³⁹

In this passage, Mercado implies that, at least in theory, a righteous person might, by divine providence, escape *entirely* any misfortune ordained by the constellations. For when righteous people suffer, this can only result from a “trace of sin” that requires cleansing—the suffering thus falling under the category of “afflictions of love.” Indeed, Mercado’s presentation suggests that such afflictions are themselves providential, not merely a consequence of God allowing the constellational order to take its course.

In the final analysis, then, notwithstanding his remarks on Psalm 1, Mercado evidently perceives that, at least to some especially righteous individuals, God extends complete or near-complete providence. He implies, accordingly, that by choosing the right path, an individual bears the prospect—as does the Israelite collective—of overcoming any misfortune ordained by the constellations.

³⁹ Commentary, 39b–40a.

The Nature of God

A. Divine Unity

Whereas the question of divine providence—for the individual and for Israel—occupies an important place in Mercado’s commentaries, his theological exegesis extends well beyond this. For one thing, while acknowledging Maimonides’ thirteen principles of faith, Mercado—on multiple occasions—sees the Psalms alluding to the three more basic, encompassing principles articulated by R. Joseph Albo: the reality of God, the divinity of the Torah, and divine justice.⁴⁰ Indeed, in a more specific way, he perceives the Psalms addressing not merely—as we have seen—the parameters of divine providence but also the nature of God and the exaltedness of the Torah.

Regarding the nature of God, we begin with two texts already familiar to us: Psalms 33 and 147. Recall that Psalm 33, according to Mercado, features a sequence of references to different types of providence. In the middle of that sequence, however, we encounter a puzzling formulation pertaining to God’s relationship to human beings: “He fashions their hearts together” (הַיּוֹצֵר יֶחֶד לִבָּם; 33:15). Mercado, in turn, drawing on a Talmudic reading of this formulation—and perceiving it through a Maimonidean lens—offers the following explanation of its relevance in context:

Let me now explain why [the text], between [its references to] general and individualized [providence], inserts the verse, “He fashions their hearts together....” Deniers, you must know, say that God, may He be exalted, exercises no providence over this world. After all, how can [...] the mind of the One characterized by ultimate simplicity register the affairs of the innumerable existents? Because His knowledge is not additional to His essence—rather, His knowledge *is* His essence—if He knew multiple things then His essence would be multiple [...]. The sages, however, anticipated this matter, explaining that His knowledge is not like ours [...]: He knows all the creations with one [encompassing] knowledge, something that our intellect cannot fathom. [...] That is the implication here [of the phrase], “He fashions their hearts together.” Indeed, the sages derive from this that “everyone is scanned [by God] in

⁴⁰ R. Albo presents his view in *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*, 1:3. See Mercado’s endorsement of Maimonides’ principles in the latter half of the commentary on Ps 24, followed by his proposed interpretation of the psalm as an expression of R. Albo’s more basic tenets (*Commentary*, 30a–b); and see also his exposition of Ps 96 (*Commentary*, 80b–81a).

one scan” (כולן נסקרין בסקירה אחת) b. *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 18a).⁴¹

In this passage, Mercado explains that the psalmist, before affirming God’s providence over individuals, found it necessary to address a problem: how can God, in His simple oneness, possess knowledge of multiple creations? In response to this problem, the psalm inserts the phrase “He fashions their hearts together,” which, as interpreted by the Talmud, means that “everyone is scanned [by God] in one scan.” This interpretation, Mercado contends, in line with the view of Maimonides, affirms that God’s knowledge of individuals takes a form—however impenetrable to human understanding—that does not stand in conflict with His absolute singularity.⁴²

Recall, furthermore, that in Psalm 147, the text states that God “counts the stars by number, calling them all by name.” If, however, God knows each star individually, this yields the same problem posed by divine providence over individual human beings: how might God’s knowledge of particulars accord with His simple oneness? Mercado, in turn, addressing the phrase לתבונתו אין מספר (literally, “there is no number to His comprehension”; 147:5) in the ensuing verse, offers the following creative explanation:

Alternatively—and this, in my view, is the correct [interpretation]—this phrase corresponds to the prior assertion that “He counts the stars by number.” [The point is] that we should not think to ourselves, “How can it be that He knows the total number of the stars? For if that were true, His knowledge would be multiple, and because His knowledge is His essence, His essence would then be multiple, Heaven forbid [...]” Thus it says, “there is no number to His comprehension,” meaning that, although God knows their total number, there is no multiplicity to His comprehension. For whereas we can grasp a total only by counting each thing individually, [...] He knows them all in one encompassing way.⁴³

According to Mercado, then, the psalmist—by the phrase “there is no number to His comprehension”—again troubles to clarify that, despite God’s knowledge of individual existents, that knowledge, however elusively to human understanding, does not compromise the singularity of the divine essence.

⁴¹ *Commentary*, 36a.

⁴² See *Guide*, 3:20–21; and cf. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah*, 2:10.

⁴³ *Commentary*, 115b.

B. Divine Inscrutability

In a more fundamental way, the inscrutability of God governs Mercado's reading of other psalms. In Psalm 104, the speaker extols God through an appreciation of the divine creation. Verse 1 introduces that account with the phrase, "O Lord my God, You are exceedingly great; You are clothed in glory and majesty" (ה' אלקי גדלת מאד הוד והדר לבשת). Here is the relevant part of Mercado's comment, again informed by the thought of Maimonides:

The most likely explanation, I believe, is as follows: "O Lord my God, You are exceedingly great" when Your essence is [sought to be] characterized, in the sense that it eludes [human] understanding. Instead, "You are clothed in glory and majesty." That is, when we assign glory and majesty to Your name, this does not mean that we grasp Your essence. Rather, we acknowledge You and glorify Your name based on Your actions: it is through them that we grasp Your greatness, seeing only the "clothing," which does not constitute the essence of the one who wears it.⁴⁴

In this passage, Mercado assigns to the psalmist the Maimonidean view that humans can know God only through his actions.⁴⁵ When the poem, then, exalts God by describing His creations, it portrays Him in the only way that a person can. The opening verse, accordingly, in stating that God is "exceedingly great," suitably makes this very point, implying that the divine essence stands beyond the grasp of human beings. Indeed, the verse continues, all that humans can do is to appreciate the "glory and majesty" in which God is "clothed"—a reference to the splendid divine creations that the psalm proceeds to recount.

Psalm 139, furthermore, which describes the pervasiveness of divine knowledge, bears particular theological salience according to Mercado: among other matters, it expresses yet another aspect of God's inscrutability. Verse 5 of the psalm reads, "You created me back and front, and You placed Your hand upon me" (אחור וקדם צרתני ותשת עלי כפכה). Drawing on the Midrash (*Gen Rab.* 8:1), Mercado explains that, by this formulation, the poem refers to the creation of the first human being, who was male on one side and female on the other. Moreover, consistent with Maimonidean exegesis, the male side represents the good

⁴⁴ *Commentary*, 85b.

⁴⁵ See *Guide*, 1:52–54.

inclination, whereas the female side represents material desire.⁴⁶ By implication, then, the text alludes to the choice of an individual to pursue the correct path or its opposite. Meanwhile, God “places” His “hand” on the individual, encouraging the selection of the right alternative.

If, however, in keeping with the theme of the psalm, God possesses comprehensive knowledge, how does this accord with human choice? According to Mercado, the psalmist addresses this problem in the next verse, stating, “Knowledge is too wondrous for me; it is too exalted for me to attain it” (פליאה דעת ממני נשגבה לא אוכל לה) (139:6):

In the *Laws of Repentance* (5:5), Maimonides addresses the question of how God, while knowing the future, nonetheless does not coerce our decisions. The answer to this, he states, is that [God’s] knowledge is not like ours: just as His essence is concealed from us, so is His knowledge—for they are one and the same. We thus cannot grasp how, even as we act according to our will, God knows what will occur. In this vein, the psalmist says here, “Knowledge is too wondrous for me; it is too exalted for me to attain it” [...].⁴⁷

Here again, then, Mercado sees the psalmist anticipating a Maimonidean claim pertaining to the nature of the divine: if God, notwithstanding our free will, knows all that will occur, this suggests that His knowledge—in a way that is utterly beyond our grasp—differs fundamentally from our own.⁴⁸

The Exaltedness of the Torah

Lastly, we turn our attention to Mercado’s conception of the exaltedness of the Torah. Psalm 119 offers a lengthy appreciation of the joys and merits of following God’s law. Addressing the phrase פלאות עדותיך (“Your testimonies are wondrous”; 119:129), our commentator assigns to the Torah a particular unique quality:

The meaning [of this phrase] is that [God’s testimonies] are written in a wondrous fashion, whereby it is obvious that “the writing is the writing of God” (המכתב מכתב אלקים הוא) (Exod 32:16). In the case of human writings [...], accounts of past events never contain—as does God’s Torah—an [additional] layer [of meaning] that

⁴⁶ See Maimonides’ cryptic remarks in *Guide*, 2:30 and the elaboration by Maimonidean exegetes such as Radak, whose approach I elucidate in the latter half of *Radak on Genesis*.

⁴⁷ *Commentary*, 110a.

⁴⁸ See *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Repentance*, 5:5; and cf. *Guide*, 3:20.

hints at profound secrets and wondrous matters. Instead, [...] their lone objective is to convey historical truth. [Conversely], in the case of other [human] writings that present riddles and parables in the form of stories, the events [that those stories recount] did *not* occur in reality. In the text of the Torah, however, the two matters coincide: it recounts actual historical events, and on a layer beneath the simple meaning of the words, [we find] hints, great secrets, and profound wisdom. Thus did [R. Yitzhak Arama], author of *Akedat Yitzhak*, trenchantly explain the present formulation, “Your testimonies are wondrous.”⁴⁹

In this passage, favoring a particular conception of the Torah’s esotericism, Mercado—following *Akedat Yitzhak*—affirms that when biblical stories, on a deeper layer of meaning, convey esoteric concepts, the straightforward meaning of the text remains true. That is, the events took place just as Scripture recounts them, even as the presentation simultaneously yields a more profound, conceptual interpretation. The psalmist, he thus explains, by the formulation “Your testimonies are wondrous,” hints at this very point: the Torah, this phrase implies, features a distinctive kind of multiplicity of meaning that distinguishes it from other writings.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Mercado contends, this unique aspect of the Torah, which a human being cannot emulate, attests unequivocally to its divine origin.

Another affirmation of the distinctiveness of the Torah appears in Psalm 19, which, after acknowledging the inspirational qualities of nature, extols the attributes of God’s law. In this psalm, Mercado perceives several theological assertions pertaining to the Torah. For example, in the formulation “the testimonies of the Lord are faithful, making the simple-minded wise” (עדות ה' נאמנה מהכימת פתי; 19:8), he sees a declaration of the Torah’s trustworthiness on the central question—much discussed by Maimonideans—of the temporality of the world. Namely, while a simple-minded individual might otherwise be persuaded (מתפתה) to believe that the world always existed, the Torah’s affirmation that it has a beginning—because the attestations of God are “faithful”—

⁴⁹ *Commentary*, 101a.

⁵⁰ While this point appears in multiple contexts in *Akedat Yitzhak*, I cannot find a stated connection to this particular verse. See esp. the epilogue (נעילת השער) to השער הראשון on Genesis, and also the lengthy discussion in השביעי.

decisively refutes that belief.⁵¹

Of particular interest, consider the following passage, where Mercado, following R. Joseph Albo, departs in a fundamental way from the thought of Maimonides:

When [the psalmist] continues to say, “The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes” (מצות ה' ברה מאירת עינים; Ps 19:9), he is addressing the claim that the apprehension of intelligibles is what yields contentment and pleases God, that this is what enlightens the eyes of the soul and generates a connection to the Active Intellect, and that one cannot attain any heights at all by means of [righteous] action. In opposition to this, [the psalm] states that “the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes”—meaning the eyes of the soul. For God desires observance of His commandments more than exclusive involvement in the apprehension of intelligibles.⁵²

Reacting to the extreme Maimonidean emphasis on intellectual attainment toward the goal of knowing God, Mercado sees the poem directly excluding that position, instead extolling the value of following God’s precepts.⁵³ Specifically, in declaring that the commandments of God “enlighten the eyes,” the psalmist means that they enlighten “the eyes of the *soul*”—evidently in the sense of generating an enduring connection to the divine. Whereas Maimonides, accordingly, assigns utilitarian value to the majority of the Torah’s commandments—seeing them as facilitating, directly or otherwise, the nurturing of the intellect for the purpose of knowing God—Mercado insists that they bear intrinsic transcendent worth.⁵⁴

Finally, after the psalm—as Mercado understands it—proclaims the inherent greatness of the Torah, it adds two supplementary verses: “[The Torah’s precepts] are more desirable than gold, even fine gold, and they are sweeter than honey and drippings of a honeycomb (הנחמדים מזהב ומפז רב ומתוקים מדבש ונפת צופים גם עבדך נזהר בהם בשמרם) (עקב רב) (Ps 19:11–12). Drawing, apparently, on a discussion by R. Joseph Albo about love of God (*Ikkarim*, 3:35), Mercado, in his explana-

⁵¹ See Maimonides’ interpretation of Gen 1:1 at the beginning of *Guide*, 2:30, and his assertion there that time began only with the creation of the world. But see also Rashi and Ibn Ezra (ad loc.), who offer different readings of the verse.

⁵² *Commentary*, 26b.

⁵³ See esp. *Guide*, 3:51–54; and compare Mercado’s remarks to *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*, 3:3.

⁵⁴ For Maimonides’ explanations of the commandments, see *Guide*, 3:24–49.

tion of these verses, invokes the three types of objects of love identified by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (8:2):

[The psalm] affirms that the Torah is the consummate example of the “good,” which is the noblest, most exalted [category] of desirable things. [These categories] include the pleasurable, the useful, and the good (הערב והמועיל והטוב). It then states that [the Torah] also has a “useful” dimension, saying that “[its precepts] are more desirable than gold, even fine gold.” As for the “pleasurable,” it says that “they are sweeter than honey and drippings of a honeycomb.” [...] [The ensuing verse] then states that, beyond being scrupulous in studying and observing the Torah for its own sake—for it embodies ultimate goodness and perfection, and a person who is good loves the good—“Your servant is scrupulous in them” [because] “in keeping them there is great reward.”⁵⁵

With notable creativity, Mercado thus sees the psalm declaring that, while the Torah embodies the ultimate in “goodness”—the highest kind of object of love—it also meets the criteria for the other two kinds. After all, it is “useful” in bringing reward to its adherents, and engagement with it constitutes a “pleasurable” experience. Whereas the Torah, then, elicits the love of a virtuous individual primarily because of its intrinsic goodness (“a person who is good loves the good”), in reality it satisfies all three Aristotelian categories.

Conclusion

In the end, our survey of Mercado’s commentary on the Psalms provides a window into the mind of a brilliant young scholar, who saw biblical significance in the experiences of victims of the Inquisition and interpreted Scripture substantially through the lens of the Jewish rationalist tradition. Had this extraordinary yeshivah student not met a tragically early death, we may surmise that he would not only have achieved distinction in this historically pivotal Jewish community but also, with his continued maturation, have contributed more influentially to the tradition of Jewish scriptural exegesis. As the matter stands, his commentaries constitute a distinctive achievement, meriting the attention of students both of Sephardic intellectual history and of Jewish interpretation of the Bible. 

⁵⁵ *Commentary*, 27a. Maimonides alludes to these three Aristotelian categories in his *Eight Chapters* (5), but Mercado’s concise enumeration of them quite probably derives from Albo’s discussion.